



University of Chester



**This work has been submitted to ChesterRep – the University of Chester's
online research repository**

<http://chesterrep.openrepository.com>

Author(s): Elaine L Graham

Title: A remembrance of things (best) forgotten: The 'allegorical past' and the
feminist imagination

Date: 2012

Originally published in: Feminist Theology

Example citation: Graham, E. L. (2012). A remembrance of things (best) forgotten:
The 'allegorical past' and the feminist imagination. *Feminist Theology*, 21, 58-70

Version of item: Author's post-print

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/248813>

A Remembrance of Things (Best) Forgotten: the 'allegorical past' and the Feminist Imagination

Feminist Theology

1–13

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permission: sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/096673501424809

fth.sagepub.com

 SAGE

Elaine Graham

Abstract

The US TV series *Mad Men*, set in an advertising agency in 1960s New York, offers a vivid portrayal of corporate sexism in pre-feminist America, and yet its creators defend it as a 'feminist' show. Reflecting on the series, I will draw out two key elements which seem significant for a consideration of the current state of feminism in church and academy, both of which centre around what it means to remember or (not) to forget. First, there is the power of what might be called 'the allegorical past' in helping to shape the sensibilities of both feminist theory and feminist theology: reimagining the past in order to destabilize the present and to re-envision the future. But second there is the question of whether we have become too complacent – and forgetful about the sexual revolution of the past 50 years, and whether a new wave of 're-membering' our feminist heritage is required, in order to rejuvenate progressive visions of critique and transformation.

Keywords

Allegorical Past, Feminism, *Mad Men* (TV), Utopia

Introduction

Any attempt to survey the current state of feminist scholarship and its implications for religion and theology is fraught with difficulty. The diversity of different schools of thought and the proliferation of voices and perspectives of women of colour, of different economic groups, sexualities and geographical locations, makes any single overview impossible. So it is not my intention to attempt some kind of 'master narrative' or view

Corresponding author:

Elaine Graham

Email: e.graham@chester.ac.uk

from nowhere in this paper; nor will I attempt to offer any kind of basic introduction to feminist or womanist theory or theology.

Instead, I want to reflect on the prospects for something we might term the 'feminist imagination,' by which I mean a particular way of locating oneself as both theoretician and practitioner within the narratives and flows of history, all the better to understand the present and reorientate the future. This is an imagination that is thus both about knowing and acting: something close to my heart as essentially a practical theologian, interested in the interaction of beliefs and values with the practices of faith.

I might even say that practical theologians share with all theologians of liberation – including and especially feminist/womanist/postcolonial theologians – a sense of inhabiting the tension between tradition and experience, theory and practice. Those who have historically been excluded from authoritative positions in Church and society and those who find their contemporary situations invisible to or even demonized by the powers that be, embody that difficult negotiation between 'the what *is* and what *ought-to-be*' (Rahner, 1972: 102, cited in Miller-McLemore, 2009: 57). It is what Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2009: 48) recently described as 'the slippery fault line between the rhetoric of creation in God's image and the complicated reality of its embodiment.' It applies to anyone charged with 'the descriptive and normative task of standing at the juncture of belief and practice, sustaining a faith in practice that coheres with the faith confessed' (Miller-McLemore, 2009: 58) – or, in essence, anyone interested in how to integrate what people of faith practise with what they preach. And invariably, the reality of the present – what is – and the rhetoric of the future – what might be – is shaped by the authority of the past – what *was*. Yet often the past is seen as something absolute and prescriptive, offering few choices, few alternatives, rather than cultivating an openness to seeing critically and acting differently. A complete misrepresentation of what is meant by 'tradition,' actually, but nevertheless a regrettable commonplace.

This paper is essentially a discussion about the power of a critical imagination which is capable of imagining different configurations of past, present and future in order to challenge the fixity of the past and the stifling authority of history – or particular versions of it. It seeks to 'estrangle' ourselves from the taken-for-grantedness of the *status quo* so that what is no longer seems quite 'natural' or inevitable. Such a critical moment of the workings of the imagination helps to fuel a more reconstructive or transformative step, towards building practical alternatives, and is at the heart of many progressive or emancipatory movements in church and society, especially those that speak for women and their allies across religious traditions, cultures and material circumstances.

I will focus on a number of ways in which feminist, womanist and postcolonial theorists and theologians have destabilized the past in order to 'redeem' the present (Jantzen, 2001: 219) and gain critical agency over the future. The first is the telling of an 'allegorical past' whereby we are called to remember how history has shaped us, for better or worse, in order to overcome complacency and resignation in the face of the given. The second relates to the utopian imagination, in which fantastic or fictional narratives serve to displace the familiarity of the real, once more disrupting any sense of the inevitability of the present. The third will be familiar to anyone who has encountered any feminist or womanist theology, Church history or biblical exegesis, which is to challenge the historical invisibility of women and to reclaim them as active agents in history. In the process,

‘canonical’ notions of authority are destabilized, allowing for subaltern interpretations and the generation of new traditions.

All my examples revolve to some extent around the power of memory and acts of remembering, with its implied meaning of integration and wholeness. Yet I am aware of the paradox between forms of memory and critical imagination that are committed to some versions of history as more authentic than others, and those which actually subvert the notion that memory is ever reliable in telling us the ‘truth’ about ourselves at all. Maybe this is a necessary dialectic, and a reminder that remembering is never at an end: a necessary wake-up call to concerns that contemporary feminists have lost their memories, and in forgetting have surrendered a vital part of their creative and critical energies.

***Mad Men*: A Remembrance of Things (Best) Forgotten**

I choose to begin, however, with a piece of contemporary popular culture, and the television series *Mad Men*, made by the company AMC in the United States and syndicated worldwide, showing in the UK on BBC Four and BBC Two. The first season debuted in July 2007, and the fourth season started screening in August 2010 in the US and in spring 2011 in the UK. All four series are available on DVD, and a fifth season is planned for early 2012.

The show is set in New York in the early 1960s. The title is derived from the setting, which is Madison Avenue, home of the emergent advertising industry, at a fictional firm called Sterling Cooper. The central character is the company’s charismatic creative executive, Don Draper, his colleagues and his wife and family. The series shows a punctilious attention to historical detail in its representation of early 1960s design, clothing, architecture and material culture, as well as charting the role advertising played not just in responding to, but in actually forging, much of what we experience today in terms of mass consumer culture (Marcotte, 2009). But what it also depicts in scrupulous detail is the sexual politics of the time: for this is undoubtedly a man’s world. The culture of the office is chain-smoking, hard-drinking and heterosexually machismo. Women are to be seen and not heard: to be decorative, sexually available and compliant, both at home and in the office.¹

The three lead women characters are Betty Draper, Don’s wife; Joan Holloway, senior office secretary at Sterling Cooper; and Peggy Olson, an ambitious junior copywriter. All three experience the situation so acutely diagnosed by Simone de Beauvoir, of the impossibility of remaining a mature and self-determining ‘sovereign subject’ whilst still conforming to conventional definitions of feminine identity (de Beauvoir, 2009: 739). All three, in different ways, struggle to maintain a coherent sense of identity

1 This is also a world more or less exclusively made up of *white* males: the few African-American characters feature only as ancillary workers such as a domestic help or elevator operative. The one exception, Sheila White, the African-American girlfriend of Paul Kinsey, one of copywriters at Sterling Cooper, gives him the push after she suspects him of being less than sincere about his commitment to the civil rights movement.

or autonomy, whether or not they choose to resist or embrace socially-sanctioned ideals of women's destiny.

Women in the workplace, such as Joan and Peggy, looking to make it in a man's world, find that their presence is tolerated but that simply to survive, let alone flourish, entails many compromises. Joan is headed for the marriage of her dreams to a successful man,² but this will mean the end of her professional and sexual power over men. (As a married woman she will be expected to give up her career and she will no longer be seen as available and sexually attractive to the men at Sterling Cooper.) Peggy is easily the most gifted of the junior staff but constantly patronized and side-lined by her male colleagues. She is frequently dismissed as the office 'frump' on the assumption that professional success and ambition are incompatible with sexual attractiveness. After a brief office affair, she has an illegitimate child, so she knows the stigma of unmarried pregnancy; she is also a practising Roman Catholic and is therefore trying to make sense of her ambitions and her shame in a particular moral context in which patriarchal values are similarly (if more subtly) demonstrated.

As well as depicting the world of work, *Mad Men* shows us married women's isolation in the captivity of the suburbs. Don's wife, Betty, is the epitome of this *ennui*, and her frustration is one of the dramatic pivots of the series. It is perhaps no accident that she shares her name with that of Betty Friedan, one of the pioneers of 1960s second wave feminism as the author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), in which she talked of 'the problem with no name,' or the dilemma of a generation of Western women who were highly-educated, had some expectation of freedom after World War Two but who now found themselves trapped in domesticity and motherhood.

All three women have struck uncomfortable bargains with patriarchy, therefore, even though in all their lives the seeds of new consciousness and new possibilities are germinating, however slowly. Peggy represents a new-found economic freedom and mobility for Western women following the Second World War, even though she struggles to reconcile her independence and intelligence with her sexuality. For Joan, the promise of sexual freedom only brings a 'precarious sovereignty' (de Beauvoir, 2009: 660) which reinforces her objectification. Her marriage leaves her unfulfilled but unable to find an outlet beyond the constraints of domesticity. For Betty, the embellishments of feminine beauty and motherhood are but compensations for her lack of freedom and self-determination. In de Beauvoir's terms, she has settled for vicarious rather than self-determined existence: 'from her childhood and throughout her life, she is spoiled, she is corrupted by the fact that this resignation ... is meant to be her vocation' (de Beauvoir, 2009: 773).

I think many viewers watch *Mad Men* with a kind of horrified compulsion. It is truly painful and poignant to see Betty, Joan and Peggy in their various ways all suffering the compromises and humiliations necessary for survival in a world that offers them few real choices. Conformity to male values restricts their opportunities for autonomy, maturity and independence. Yet there are hints as well at the costs to the men too, in living up to the competitive, high-stakes masculine ideal.

2 Joan's fiancé is an ambitious junior physician, but is physically and sexually abusive towards her.

The 'allegorical past'

So it may be a surprise to know that *Mad Men* is seen by many critics as a feminist show. In placing us at that moment just before second-wave feminism would explode, along with much of the rest of the civil rights movement, it holds up a critical lens to the sexual politics of the time. The unenlightened attitudes of Sterling-Cooper are meant to shock and surprise us, but this is intended to prompt consideration of the temporal and political space between them and us. It reminds us that some very significant transformations have taken place in the West, in the social attitudes and political and economic circumstances which have brought about the women's movement, civil rights and the sexual revolution. It suggests that these were not accidental but occurred largely as a result of people's ambitions for a more equal and just society. Yet it causes us to consider whether many of the same problems still persist: the expectations on women to choose between families and careers; the fragile allure of consumerism and the beauty industry; the pressures to conform to workplace culture at the cost of individual well-being.

One critic locates *Mad Men* in a longer tradition of radical and critical art by focusing on its use of an 'allegorical past' (Heidkamp, 2007): of taking a fictional depiction of a real historical period but using it to hold a critical mirror to the preoccupations or experiences of its contemporary audience. Other critics have argued that the didactic purpose of this is too obvious and heavy-handed, calling it 'Now We Know Better TV' (Greif, 2008), and criticizing its knowing smugness towards the sexism, racism, avarice and cruelty it depicts. But what it does provide is an object lesson in the power of remembering: history has something to teach us, not least about its own contingency. The world of *Mad Men* has its own logic, of a particular social contract struck between men and women for the sake of a particular way of life. But whilst we can see the liberation that will come once that pact begins to break down, we are also encouraged to empathize with those for whom such changes will come at a price. In that respect *Mad Men's* view of the past is unashamedly feminist and full of moral endeavour, whilst containing a deep compassion towards the contradictions of the past, however reprehensible.

Utopia and the Feminist Imagination

The creator of *Mad Men*, Matt Weiner, has also referred to it as 'science fiction,' which may be something we associate more with futuristic entertainment than a show about the 1960s. But this does locate the series' core sensibilities with a genre whereby we are transported (by space ship or perhaps time machine) to an alien place or time, experiencing an estrangement from everything we take for granted, precisely in order to question the naturalism and inevitability of the familiar.

This is often associated with the 'utopian' tradition in literature, politics and philosophy, beginning with Thomas More's work of the same name, published in 1516. 'Utopia' is the conflation of two Greek words, meaning 'no place' (*outopia*) and 'a good place' (*eutopia*). Such imaginary situations can be optimistic – utopian – or pessimistic – dystopian – but they are intended to be prophetic, not in the sense of forecasting the future, but of offering oblique comment or satire on current mores. They carry clear didactic and political purposes (Levitas, 1993). When reading of a fictional utopia in which all

wealth and goods are held in common, we question the wisdom of private property; when reading of a utopia in which science and technology are used for peaceful and not warlike means, we question the priorities behind our own military and economic systems; when reading of a utopia in which relationships between women and men are pacific and egalitarian, we wonder about the naturalism of our own battle of the sexes. But equally, confronted with the question 'What If?' in relation to a dystopia, in which, for example, the Nazis have won the Second World War, or the abolition of slavery never happened, or women are still treated as the objects and possessions of men, we see how fragile are the foundations on which we rest our taken-for-granted liberties and claims to civilization. It's essentially about holding up a refracted mirror to ourselves, and as Francis Spufford (1996: 274) comments, 'In one way or another, [utopias] raise the ghost of another possibility in order to investigate the groundwork of the real; they raise it in order to lay it again.'

Such utopian imagination has an honourable place in the history of feminism, beginning perhaps with Mary Shelley's precocious reworking of the myth of Prometheus and the homunculus in *Frankenstein* (1819), to include authors such as Charlotte Gilman, Ursula le Guin, Joanne Russ, Samuel Delany, Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood.

Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1984) is an outstanding example, and a splendid way of using such literature – in this case a dystopian example – to think through all sorts of issues of religion, culture and gender. Atwood imagines a parallel present or near-future in the USA, where a kind of Christian Taliban, born of the North American Moral Majority of the 1980s, has taken over the government, reducing women to the status of 'handmaids' bearing children for the barren wives of the patriarchs in a post-reproductive technological version of the Hebrew Bible stories of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar and Jacob (Genesis 16), Rachel and Bilhah (Genesis 30). Atwood sketches out an alternative present/future in which the 'backlash' against the sexual revolution has taken hold, and allows us to see how religious fundamentalism, militarism and reproductive technology conspire together in the making of a fearful theocracy. It is a refraction of our times, but through that holds up to view both the gains of the 1960s-70s women's movement and its enduring fragility.

Against the Grain of History

The feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen was similarly concerned to destabilize the taken-for-grantedness of what she termed the Western imaginary, with its preoccupation with death. Her critical tools of choice were poststructuralist deconstruction and feminist psychoanalysis: in particular, a reading of Michel Foucault's concept of 'genealogy' and what he called 'the history of the present,' whereby the presuppositions of Western modernity are problematized.³ Particular patterns of knowledge and disciplinary or institutional power create the taxonomies and practices by which 'normality' and 'deviance' are circumscribed.

3 Foucault also advanced the concept of 'heterotopia' as a device to question the taken-for-grantedness of the present, and in the process sowing the seeds of suspicion that other world(s) might be possible.

Similarly, Jantzen used Lacanian psychoanalysis to expose the way in which the coherent knowing subject is created via a process of repression of its 'Others.' To disclose the fragility and constructedness of such axioms of Western society – and their deep complicity in a culture of necrophilia – was but a first step towards imagining an alternative, built on the premises of life, birth and natality (Jantzen, 1994, 2007; Graham, 2009). Like utopian literature, such reading against the grain 'estranges' us from the familiar, which once displaced from its position of hegemony and inevitability, can be disrupted and redirected. In a late essay, published posthumously, Jantzen also drew on the work of Paul Ricoeur, to stress the power of political or cultural interventions that swim against the stream of determinism or resignation, and from such a position of 'exteriority' (or estrangement) proceed to imagine creative alternatives (Jantzen, 2007: 189-90).

Such a method thus exposes the fixity or naturalism of the present by upsetting its taken-for-grantedness. It exposes the incoherence in systems that claim to be self-evident; it offers counter-narratives to established versions of historical orthodoxy. Agency, transformation and ethics all depend on our having a freedom to see how our current ~~constraints~~ dilemmas are the products of history and not random visitations of events. Yet when we are enabled to see ourselves as the products of choices made, rather than accident or fate, then we release ourselves from a captivity to the past. In true feminist spirit – echoing de Beauvoir's call for women to throw off the 'bad faith' of women's self-abnegation – we become subjects of history and not its objects.

I have concentrated on the utopian aspect of remembering, but I will discuss briefly another staple of feminist/womanist theology, along with many other disciplines: that of retrieving women's lives, testimonies and achievements in the name of creating (or restoring?) a living heritage from which women can draw strength and encouragement.

The feminist historian Joan Scott has argued that the scholarly enterprise of forging the discipline of Feminist or Women's History was closely linked to the political objectives of second-wave feminism insofar as both were seeking 'to make women proper objects of historical study.' In order to establish a role for themselves in contemporary society, women have had to counter the argument that they have never been competent, never been capable, of exercising agency in the public domain. So to find historical precedent for this was the first step towards changing future prospects.

Feminism's History has offered demonstrations, in the form of exemplary instances from the past, of women's worthiness to engage in the same activities as men ... It has provided heroines to emulate and lineages for contemporary activists ... has exposed as instruments of patriarchal power stories that explained the exclusion of women as a fact of nature. And it has written new histories [or herstories] to counter the "lie" of women's passivity, as well as their erasure from the records that constitute collective memory (Scott, 2004: 18).

Yet this reappropriation of old stories and the telling of new ones has also had a utopian and subversive function, by providing 'the substantive terms for a critical operation that uses the past to disrupt the certainties of the present and so [opening] the way to imagining a different future' (Scott, 2004: 18).

The best example of this for me is Alice Walker's rehabilitation of the writer Zora Neale Hurston (1984). Hurston was a figure of the African-American literary scene in the

1920s but died impecunious and uncelebrated. In her essay, Walker describes how she goes to Hurston's home town to search for her grave and to erect a fitting monument to her. It is all the more poignant when Walker realizes that when Hurston died, cemeteries were still racially segregated. In a wonderful metaphor for the effacement of the reputation of many women like Hurston, Walker describes how she ploughs through the overgrown weeds and accumulated neglect of the cemetery grounds, eventually – literally – stumbling on Hurston's grave, and manages to clear away the undergrowth before returning to order a brand new headstone. Rescuing women from obscurity and restoring them to prominence was a vital part of second-wave feminism, and once again demonstrates the importance of challenging the androcentric, racist criteria by which women's intellectual or political legacy was deemed less than pre-eminent.

Another memorable image comes from Kwok Pui-lan, when she talks about such acts of remembering and reclaiming as a 'process of decolonization of the mind and the soul' (2005: 3). It is about finding a place in history, by crafting an alternative to the version which condemned one to invisibility.

The appeal to universal human experience and the inability to respect diverse cultures are expressions of a colonizing motive: the incorporation of the Other into one's own culture or perspective (Kwok, 2005: 56).

But such a refusal of forgetting is both moral and epistemological – it reminds us of the sufferings and exclusions to which such lives bear testimony and serves as a device to remind us of the inexhaustibility of the past, imagined or otherwise. And while it is too simplistic to say that all any oppressed group needs to do to find liberation is to tell its story, or that 'experience' alone constitutes reliable knowing, such calls upon the power of hearing such hidden voices to speech (Morton, 1985) have been the very processes by which feminist/womanist theorists and theologians have learned their craft of reading against the grain of patriarchal history. It has taught them the skills of excavating the hidden voices and of creating new methodological paradigms to take account of the gap between the 'what is' of patriarchal exclusion and the 'what might be' of alternative cultural arrangements.

Feminist methodologies are not privileged ways of accessing "reality" but they are varied explorations (some more adequate than others) of how we can validate knowledge which is produced from different standpoints (Ramazanoglu, 1992: 209-10).

In Memory of Her: Retrieving Forgotten Women in Feminist Theology

I cannot proceed much further without mentioning, of course, one of the classics of feminist theology and Biblical Studies which places the concept of remembering – and, equally importantly, the refusal to forget – at its heart: Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* (1984). This is both about a method of feminist historiography – literally, the craft (or graft) of writing history – and how a particular method of reading New Testament texts beyond the superficiality of obedient wives and veiled and silent women

can yield up an entire counter-narrative of an egalitarian, disputatious and thriving 'community of equals.' This was profoundly significant for the emerging discipline of feminist studies in religion, insofar as it operated a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' which refused to take the texts at face value, but chose to reconstruct an entire counter-history of women's participation and discipleship in the early Church.

Undaunted by the canonicity of the pronouncements on women's silence, obedience and inferiority, Fiorenza constructed an alternative history of Christianity, casting the 'dangerous memory' of women's agency and full humanity in the context of the life and Eucharistic practices of the *ekklesia* of equals which met in the name of the risen servant Christ. As she explains in her introduction to the tenth anniversary edition, Fiorenza refused to let the dead weight of history confound her, but discovered a new way of using its testimony to reframe the past and reinvigorate the present:

History is best figured not as an accurate record or transcript of the past but as a perspectival discourse that seeks to articulate a *living memory* for the present and the future (Fiorenza, 1994: xxii, my emphasis).

Rachel Muers talks about this critical force of feminist theology, in its refusal to collude with the silencing of women's voices and perspectives, as the 'denial of a lie' (Muers, 2007). What is considered to be normative, universal within the canon has to be exposed as false, since it only represents a minority of (usually) white, powerful men. Theologies of liberation such as those forged by feminists, womanists and others refuse to limit talk about God and constructions of authoritative tradition simply to one partial, contingent version; and to deny the lie of a single, absolute version is to open up new routes whereby diversity of experience and revelation are seen as integral to the articulation of theological understanding. Muers follows therefore in the footsteps of Rosemary Radford Ruether, in her seminal insights in *Sexism and God-Talk* where she too, clearly and decisively exposed the androcentricism of theology and called for new criteria of authenticity:

The uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of *women's* experience, which has been almost entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past. The use of women's experience in feminist theology, therefore, explodes as a critical force, exposing classical theology, including its codified traditions, as based on *male* experience rather than on universal human experience (Ruether, 1993: 13).

Of course, one later lesson was that there could be no single, universal, cross-cultural or trans-historical 'Woman' who spoke for all conditions, as awareness of differences of race, ethnicity, religion, social class, sexuality and dis/ability worked its way into theorizing. But the significance of vantage-point and context in the making of knowledge and the formation of subject-hood taught feminist theory a powerful further lesson: it was not simply about 'writing women in' to a single authoritative canon, but asking questions about the very way in which gender, knowledge and power intersected to produce hegemonic systems of truth (Walby, 2000).

Joan Scott comments similarly, about feminist history being not only about a retrieval of the achievements and exclusions of the past, but also about a lesson in methodology.

It is not enough to replace one line of authorizing or monolithic tradition with another (compare Ruether's insistence that feminist theology is not about reversing or inverting, but about abolishing hierarchies), but about realizing how all our pasts, presents and futures are fluid, contested, multi-dimensional and open to change. As Scott remembers, 'we were not just adding women to an existing body of stories, we were changing the way the stories would be told' (2004: 10).

This is not to deny that certain events in the past 'really happened' or to argue that subjectivity is entirely constructed through discourse, but, in a sense, to remind ourselves that memories are always dangerous and subversive of complacency – something that arch-patriarch Sigmund Freud knew very well, but which is also articulated by this particular appeal to a *feminist* imagination.

Resisting the Forgetting of Memory

At the beginning of the 21st century, many critics are asking whether we are witnessing a certain loss of confidence, a loss of momentum in the women's movement as 'no longer moving, no longer vital, no longer relevant' (Siegel, 1997: 75). There is a feeling amongst stalwarts of second-wave movements that a successor generation has failed to keep the faith, that the political and economic edge of 1960s and 1970s campaigns has been relegated in favour of a preoccupation with the representations of popular culture, with a post-structuralist obsession with plays of difference, or at worst a critique of second-wave campaigns as demonstrating a form of 'victim feminism' that has now been superseded by what was called 'power-feminism, applauding women's growing success, identification with their jobs and their ability to help each other' (Segal, 1999: 228; see also Gillis and Munford, 2004).

Second-wave feminists found themselves accused of being both too successful and not successful enough. So on the one hand, women did now have it all and further campaigns were superfluous; yet at the same time, feminism was accused of having failed ordinary women and to be irrelevant to their concerns (Faludi, 1991). For this wave of post- (some would say anti-) feminists, knowledge of their own history, especially that of women's oppression, was negative rather than liberatory. 'It's very, very bad to convince young women that they have been victims and that their heritage is nothing but victimization,' said Camille Paglia (1992: 274), choosing not to see that even if this was to succumb to 'victim feminism,' it had always only ever been one stage in the process of diagnosis and transformation.

Difficulties arise, too, as the move into the mainstream of feminist and womanist perspectives in the academy brings with it the threat of assimilation, as scholars move from being 'insurgents' to 'disciplinarians' (Scott, 2004: 19). In the UK now, over half the entrants into Higher Education are female, although the gendered division of labour still means they are concentrated in the arts and humanities. Even for professional women, however, there is a gendered pay gap, and many struggles for equality remain to be resolved – not least within the churches.

But to defend the later generation of feminists of the 1990s and beyond, they were taking the use of feminist theorizing to challenge what they saw as the shortcomings of second-wave feminism, and its discomfort with growing diversities of identity: to align

itself not just along the fault-lines of gender, but race, class, sexual orientation and disability, as well as its need to take account of the dynamics of globalization – even to accommodate to a ‘post-secular’ world. It also tried to take feminism out of the academy and into the realms of everyday life, including the lived experience of popular culture. Yet in return, critics of this ‘third wave’ suspect it has been orchestrated by an anti-feminist media (Gamble, 2001a: 43) or have accused it of being merely ‘a short-lived fashion rather than a genuine indication that women have reached the next stage in the feminist struggle’ (Gamble, 2001b: 327).

As Sarah Gamble comments, therefore, the argument that women can cast off their victimhood and claim their power may work for white, educated women, but has little bearing on the lives of women of colour, those living in poverty, or those denied basic human rights. It’s too easy, says Gamble, ‘to take one’s own privileged position as representative, which can lead to the conclusion that the time for feminism is past, and that those who still cling to activist principles are deluded and fanatical’ (2001a: 53). So for many who identified with the second wave, the criticisms of the so-called post-feminists are misplaced, and risk diverting energy into cultural critique at the expense of continued reform in the economic, legal and educational prospects of women.

The Allegorical Past and the Feminist Imagination: Conclusion

I have been arguing that the imagination is both a subversive and emancipatory resource. It operates as a dialectic, of disrupting notions of the past as seamless and reliable – as familiar – in order to ‘re-member’ hidden and forgotten voices. Which returns us to the ‘restlessness’ (Scott, 2004: 23) of the feminist imagination, which whilst mindful of the priority of its moral imperative to promote the full humanity of women, is still a work in progress. At the heart of its critical genius is to eschew fixed histories, to challenge unsailable authorities and deny the foreclosures of slogans such as ‘biology is destiny’ and ‘there is no alternative.’ To rest content with any single narrative or identity is to deny the creativity of imagination. ‘What makes – has made – Feminism’s History so exciting is precisely its radical refusal to settle down, to call even a comfortable lodging a “home”’ (Scott, 2004: 21).

For all that it seeks the reconstructive promise of what the critical theorist Ernst Bloch called ‘concrete utopia,’ a kind of mediation between present circumstances and eschatological fulfilment, which serves as the orientation for the necessary interim framework of social justice, such a pragmatic approach still needs always to be rooted in the ‘not yet’ of a vision yet to come (Velduis, 1975; Volf, 2006). The concrete utopia helps us make sense of that suspension between the world as it is and as it may become, but it must never become complacent or confuse its interim or partial perspectives with the final authority. ‘To rest content with any identity – even one we have helped produce – is to give up the work of critique’ (Scott, 2004: 23). So feminists are itinerant pilgrims, whose stories and maps provide them with some direction for the journey, but who can never be satisfied with putting down too many roots – least of all in suburbia.

Our agency ... is critique, the constant doing of conventional wisdom ... It drives us to unforeseen places. Critique ... provides no map; it is rather a standard against which to measure the dissatisfactions of the present. Its path can only be seen in retrospect, but its motion is undeniable. Historical study is a particularly effective form of feminist critique (Scott, 2004: 26).

It is necessary to 'read against the grain' of history in order to redeem it; whether it be through the telling and retelling of how we got where we are, or painstaking scholarship to excavate the stories of our foremothers, or the writing of fantastical science fiction as both inspiration and warning. All such genres are 'sketches towards a counterhistory' (Jantzen, 1994: 188) in which agency, power and knowledge are radically re-envizaged.

Despite its dark themes of sexism, feminine captivity and the abuse of power, and its refusal simply to adopt an ironic, all-knowing attitude towards its pre-feminist past, the fictitious world of *Mad Men* jolts us out of our complacency, and requires us to consider again how past, present and future are intertwined. We see the despair and contradictions that engendered the sexual revolution; yet we see how, for many, that was a hard-won and paradoxical victory. In the process it makes both the risk and the promise of the second-wave women's movement all the more real – and yet cautions us against a belief in its inevitability, reminding us that a world before feminism did and could exist, and that the transformation of personal and social relationships required the agency of real people – very often not so different from ourselves. It calls us to account for the way in which we continue to appropriate their legacy, but stimulates our desire and imagination to renew our energies for a different future.

References

- de Beauvoir, S (2009) *The Second Sex*. Trans. Borde C, Malovany-Chevallier S. Foreword by Rowbotham S. London: Jonathan Cape (first edn, 1949).
- Faludi S (1991) *Backlash: the Undeclared War on American Women*. New York: Doubleday.
- Gamble S (2001a) Postfeminism. In: Gamble S (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. London: Routledge, 43-54.
- Gamble S (2001b) Third Wave Feminism. In: Gamble S (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. London: Routledge: 327.
- Gillis S, Munford R (2004) Genealogies and generations: the politics and praxis of third wave feminism. *Women's History Review* 13(2): 165-82.
- Graham EL (2009) Redeeming the Present. In: Graham EL (ed.) *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present*. London: Ashgate, 1-19.
- Greif M (2008) You'll Love the Way It Makes You Feel. *London Review of Books* (23 October).
- Heidkamp B (2007) New 'Mad Men' TV Show Uses the Past to Reveal Racism and Sexism of Today. *Alternet* August 14. Available at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/60278>
- Jantzen GM (1994) Feminists, philosophers and mystics. *Hypatia* 9(4): 186-206.
- Jantzen GM (2001) Flourishing: towards an ethic of natality. *Feminist Theory* 2(2): 219-32.
- Jantzen GM (2007) On philosophers (not) reading history: narrative and utopia. In: Vanhoozer K, Warner M (eds) *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology*. London: Ashgate, 177-90.
- Kwok Pui-lan (2005) *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Levitas R (1993) The future of thinking about the future. In: Bird J, Curtis B, Putnam T, Robertson G, and Tickner L (eds) *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*. London: Routledge, 257-66.

- Marcotte A (2009) Mad Men, Bohemian Boys. *American Prospect* (August 14). Available at: http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=mad_men_rebellious_youth
- Miller-McLemore BJ (2009) Practising what we preach: the case of women in ministry. *Practical Theology* 2(1): 45-62.
- Morton N (1985) *The Journey is Home*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Muers R (2007) Feminist Theology as practice of the future. *Feminist Theology* 16(1): 110-27.
- Paglia C (1992) *Sex, Art and American Culture*. New York: Random House.
- Rahner K (1972) Practical theology within the totality of theological disciplines. In: *Theological Investigations* Vol. 9. Trans. Harrison G. New York: Herder & Herder.
- Ramazanoglu C (1992) Male reason versus female employment. *Sociology* 26(2): 207-12.
- Ruether RR (1993) *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press (2nd edn).
- Schüssler Fiorenza E (1994) *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad (10th anniversary edn).
- Scott JW (2004) Feminism's history. *Journal of Women's History* 16(2): 10-29.
- Segal L (1999) *Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Siegel DL (1997) Reading between the waves: feminist historiography in a 'postfeminist' moment. In: Heywood L, Drake J (eds) *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Spufford F (1996) The difference engine and *the difference engine*. In: Spufford F, Uglow J (eds) *Cultural Babbage: Technology, Time and Invention*. London: Faber & Faber, 266-90.
- Veldhuis R (1975) *Realism versus Utopianism? Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism and the Significance of Utopian Thought for Social Ethics*. Assen: Van Gorcum.
- Volf M (2006) *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Walby S (2000) In search of feminist theory. *Feminist Theory* 1(2): 236-38.
- Walker A (1984) Looking for Zora. In: *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 93-116.